

Unity in action, freedom in propaganda:

A conversation with Serda Demir, Carmen José, Santiago Pinyol, Wan Ing Que, Janneke Absil, Iliada Charalambous, and Jeanne van Heeswijk



Booklet 3 in the series **Carrots die everywhere:**
Publishing practices from the Shadow of the Moon



***Carrots die everywhere: Publishing practices from the Shadow of the Moon** was initiated through the **Shadow of the Moon** project.

Initiated in 2023, the **Shadow of the Moon** drew artists and organisers from different contexts and cultures into a process of exploratory collective research, with a focus on community work, collective imagining, and sustaining social practice. Expanding the sharing practice of the original ensemble, three reading and discussion groups were hosted in late 2024, towards a publication series.

This booklet shares an edited version of the conversation hosted at the Social Practice Library in Rotterdam, with **Serda Demir**, **Santiago Pinyol**, **Wan Ing Que**, **Janneke Absil**, **Iliada Charalambous**, **Jeanne van Heeswijk**, and **Carmen José**, who also illustrated the discussions.

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The following are parts of a conversation that took place at the Social Practice Library in Rotterdam, the Netherlands in December 2024. As a response to the invitation of the Shadow of the Moon collective to read, discuss, and write together, six community organisers came together to delve into our different experiences within activist and community spaces. The texts proposed by the Shadow of the Moon collective led us into a conversation about the joys, difficulties, connections and disconnections that we experience through our different works in community organising and as parts of art institutions, cooperatives, or collective (work) spaces.¹

“Though decentralised they are deeply networked, or rhizomatic, linking in systems, strategies and agendas. This interlinked interdependence is important so that if certain parts are paused (by the apartheid state or by a falling tree) the other parts can continue, and the affected parts can reconstitute accordingly. They operate in deeply localised and specific ways according to the set of circumstances and capacities available to them, but this structure is fractal and able to replicate itself – in a sense at scale, but not in the

Non-unitary systems

*'Non-monolithic
scaling'*

sense of monolith or singularity. This non-monolithic scaling enables various interests and positions to stand alongside each other without being the same – moving beyond simplified identities and nationhoods to collaboration and connection (sometimes temporarily) based on action and motion.”

—Molemo Moilola, *Ungovernable: reclaiming autonomy, letting go of authority*, 2020



1. See front and end pages for additional info on participants, the reading groups, and the Shadow of the Moon project.

On identity politics

YQ: The last sentence, where Molemo writes about how we have to move beyond simplified identities and nationhoods towards collaboration and connection, seems so urgent to me. Maybe we can discuss it, because I also believe it's what we need to do, but I don't know how. Identity politics, for example, is so dominant in the imaginations of ourselves.

When I learned about identity twelve years ago, it was a revelation. Any dude who would dare to say we shouldn't talk about gender and race — because it was divisive and it was class that mattered — would be shattered by our queer, feminist groups at the time. Now, I can agree to a certain point. At first, we spent a lot of time identifying ourselves before each other or figuring out who was the most oppressed and should therefore decide what to do. With it came the trying out of different pronouns (before 'they/them' stuck), the arguments and calling outs within the broader movement. That had us split and split and split off again.

It wasn't a problem for me for a long time. We were part of a larger movement facilitating exclusive, safe(r) spaces, taking back the night and the streets. It was nourishing and empowering to refuse to collaborate with anyone whose identity wasn't the same. We were strong. It was amazing to feel that we could do everything without the white cis heteropatriarchy. However, connecting back to the larger movement without exhausting ourselves seemed such an impossible feat.

Passages of identity politics: splits, calling out, refusal as nourishing. But how to connect to the larger movement?

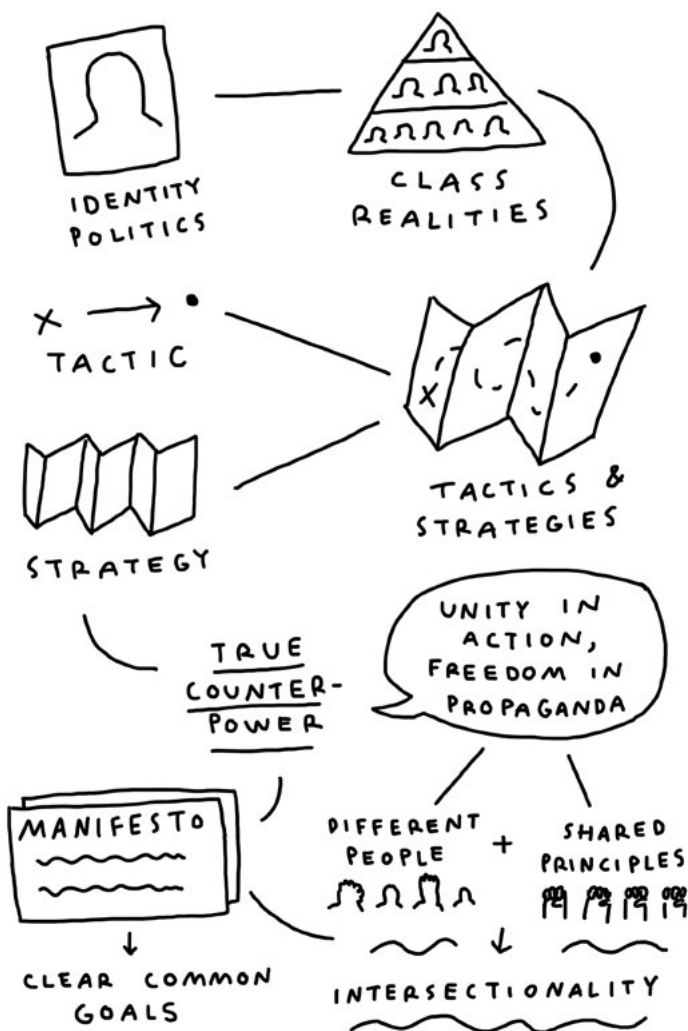
Now, I think that we subjected our comrades (and ourselves) to impossibly high moral standards and that having healthy conflict remains a skill to be widely acquired. Now, I feel like the need for unity is more important than fighting over each and every microaggression coming one's way in the process.

SD: When it comes to identity politics, I believe it downplays the class reality.

Although class is presented as a category, it is the base of the contradictions. Class is seen as a part of these structures, while class is actually what is causing all those problems. Politics based solely on identity will lead us to fight the symptoms without addressing the root cause, which is the class position.

*Centering difference
(conversation comes
up in CDE booklet 4)*

YQ: And so I wonder then, what are these actions and motions? **How can we move beyond identity politics without disappearing?**



Tactical unity, diversity of tactics, and the arc of motion

*The skills to
facilitate difference
(see booklet 4)*

“Collaboration and coordination are the most fundamental capacities that become necessary and that are very much about facilitation of ideas, knowledge and difference for agentive and productive purposes. These require and inculcate the ability to navigate conflict, to negotiate consensus and to make space for dissensus.”

—Molemo Moilola, *Ungovernable: reclaiming autonomy, letting go of authority*, 2020

SD: Finding that balance depends on your tactics and strategies, the tactical goals have to be clear, otherwise you can get lost. That means uniting around the social demands with tactical unities of political movements, but you also have to go beyond identity politics in order to make it strategic. In order to achieve collective liberation, strategy is crucial.

YQ: Just to be clear about what is the difference between tactic and strategy: tactics are short term and strategy is long term, right?

JvH: While tactics are more action-focused, they are also about creating or intervening in a common situation. Strategies are more about building up new structures. As tactics allow you to achieve small aims through actions, they also aid you in building up your long term strategy. Tactics can be seen as more relational or geared towards movement building: moving or doing things in relation and strategy as more of a form of projecting into the future perhaps.

It's about building forward infrastructure without being linear. Yet they exist together. Tactics can be the scaffolds for strategic building forward. The question here is, what are the scaffolds that we need to build? And how do you build within diverse groups, each focused on strategies mirroring specific ideologies and projections of the future? How do we come together tactically and strategically with our different visions in mind?

SD: Within True Counterpower, which is a united front of progressive movements and collectives, "there is unity in action, but freedom in propaganda", which makes it tactical unity.² We are all different, diverse groups that don't necessarily get along or need to get along, but we have to agree to the social context, and it always has to be principled. This might be a way to move beyond identity, where one doesn't have to leave one's identity behind in order to come together for a specific goal through tactical unity.

*Unity in action,
freedom in
propaganda*

YQ: The lessons and importance of intersectionality should be taken along that process and not left behind. Would tactical unity also mean respecting the diversity of tactics?

2. True Counterpower is based on the belief that a united yet undeniably complex and diverse network of organisations can operate as a robust front of counterpower striving towards political, social and cultural transformation. Collectives that are part of True Counterpower are: Aralez, Sudanese Refugee Collective, Woonopstand, Revolutionaire Eenheid, Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Network, Jina Collective, TJK-E, Extinction Rebellion Eindhoven, Kick Out Zwarte Piet, Debt for Climate, Linangan, Women for Filipino Women and Children, De Rode Lelies, and Vakbond Solidaire met Palestina.

JvH: Because motion means that it is in movement, in a flow or in a flux.

IC: And yet, when it comes to diversity of tactics, there must be a certain principled line where one can still agree on the diversity of the tactics. Sometimes red lines might be crossed, and how do you then keep that tactical unity with some sort of trust between us? Also, who sets up those lines? And how to move forward with a common understanding of the goals and processes?

SD: The drafting of a common agreement or an understanding of what the principles are that one brings to the tactical unity may be helpful. In our case, with True Counterpower, a Manifesto was collectively drafted to make the red lines and the goals clear.³ In the case of an action, it would be a consensus under which the diversity of tactics can exist.

What are the actionables around your consensus?

JvH: And then the question is, what are the actionables around your consensus agreement or policy, and what is the space of learning in this?

3. Excerpt of the *True Counterpower Manifesto*: "True Counterpower unites on the following principles: Developing the common struggle along anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal lines; Organizing and struggling for the realization of the economic, social, cultural and material demands of those who are victimized and oppressed by the current ruling powers; Protecting all life against the physical, mental and spiritual harm of state violence; Building international solidarity and unity through peoples' struggle; Opposing oppression based on race, age, gender, religion, skin color, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political views and ability; Constructing a cooperative, ecological future where human and non-human communities can coexist; Defending women and LGBTQAI+ persons to live freely with their sexual identities against the cis-hetero, patriarchal system; Advocating for safe and healthy conditions and equal access to education for all children, and opposing child labour and all other forms of violence against children; Standing up for the right of refugees to freedom of movement and a life in dignity, and opposing border violence worldwide, especially in Fortress Europe".

It's perhaps in that tension arc of motion where the learning lies or perhaps in the proximity, to each other and to the common work which needs to be built in that arc.

Tension arc of motion

IC: However, what happens when — in the context of unity, principled tactics, and the freedom of propaganda — the propaganda of one is very much against the principles of the other? When we stand for the same cause but along very different lines, what would a space where different ideologies come together look like?

Commitment to organise for the long breath and the lack of principled growth

What I have understood is that we are always committed, whether we like it or not and whether or not we live in communities; that we are always involved in a world we have in common; and that the different positions we may occupy in the world we share depend on how we accept and shape that basic *commitment*.

—Marina Garcés, *Commitment*, 2013

JvH: In that light and in regards to our commitment, if we decide to think that we, because of neo-liberal capitalism, are at the end of livable time, instead of trying to argue our way out of it by strategic vision, can we pause and think about how we want to die together? If we look at the text of Marina Garcés, she supports that we normally do not attempt to share realities other than those of our nearest and dearest. Therefore, that marks our lack of ability towards tactical unities when those seem further from us. And so she asks this question: what would it mean for us to commit to a sharing of different realities at the end of livable time, at a moment of bare survival? How does one commit to sharing across differences?

Sharing realities

SP: However, we may also consider that our current moment may instead mark the end of a system and not that of livable time. The idea that this system is able to destroy life altogether might be a big assumption. Especially as there are many worlds in this world that have been living the end of time since a long time ago.

Universalising the crisis, in a way, casts a lot of shadows, and it risks erasing so many things that are and have been happening. It is within the view of many Latin American, indigenous peoples, black peasants, and activists that the contemporary crisis is a crisis of one particular system or civilisation model — that is the patriarchal, Western, capitalist modernity.

Universalising the crisis

CJ: Yet Garces' idea of commitment not being an option but an integral part of our lives within communities is useful, especially when thinking of how we cultivate trust within cooperative, collaborative structures.⁴ Within such structures, the commitment or capacity of one may vary across time and circumstance. Frustrations may arise when a lack of commitment becomes visible in pragmatic ways as well, and the work either lags behind or is taken up by very few who, in the long term, struggle with the load of it.

YQ: Especially within a Western context, commitment or resistance appears as a choice instead of a given, embedded in our lives. As Assata Shakur said, "Solidarity is a duty", so similarly, commitment is not a choice.⁵

Duty vs. choice

4. In reply, IC: "I find trust very important when it comes to an organisation. However, when we speak of a tactical unity, although trust is important, I wonder, to what extent? How much trust? As one enters a tactical unity with awareness that perhaps you don't agree on many things but find that tactical unity important for the realisation of a certain goal or for a limited time, full trust may not be cultivated or needed, but exists rather as a long-term desire. Yet trust that one commits to this unity for the specific goal is essential."

5. "It is our duty to fight for our freedom / It is our duty to win / We must love each other and support each other / We have nothing to lose but our chains", Assata Shakur, 1987.

Whether one wants to or not, whether it's chosen or not, one is always part of an inescapable community or collectivity that only asks one for recognition.

JvH: Committing oneself is not a matter of joining a cause part of your ideology, but it means taking up a position in a world which we have in common and radically accepting the consequences. Committing oneself is discovering the world and discovering oneself in the world. Or perhaps becoming aware of what position one already occupies in the world. You live as if another world was possible, as if it's there, manifested already. That is taking a position of being committed.

SD: Yet when commitment is not pragmatic, it can not do much. One might believe in a specific cause, but if one doesn't actually have the hours to spend on it, then what does it mean? It's interesting to see that, when people who are in the position of organising and who are very much committed, if and when they leave the organisation, that commitment is immediately gone. If you look at the leftist movements, isn't it the case that, once people start to have their families and realise the social pressure in society, they/we change?

JvH: It is often the case that, in the beginning of entering a movement or forming a collective, there is a lot of enthusiasm, and many of the positions that are taken up are only informed by immediate anger, outrage, or that very enthusiasm. Problems arise in the lack of principled growth. Stamina should be built: how to do things collectively?

'principled growth'



* COMMITMENT BY MARINA GARCÉS, 2013

How to show up in different ways? What are the different capacities and flows?⁶ What does it mean to keep such an arc of motion alive?

Where people drop out (see booklet 1)

If we don't work on these questions collectively, an imbalance is created between the ones that run very, very hard and the rest. Ideological disagreements can become weird drop out points. Expectations, capacities, and methods must be balanced out.

Is it possible that we can sometimes be gentler or kinder to ourselves in how we show up and respect the different ways that people show up in the different trajectories? How can we hold that in an arc over time? How to keep work resilient and allow this tactical unity to be continued? Maybe one way is collective learning, but another is a gentle understanding about what needs to be done.

6. In reply, JA: "In our work within the Afrikaanderwijk Cooperative and in other collectives, we try to always start with an access sheet. What are the capacities of each person? Which hours or days can one dedicate? What are the work schedules, and how can we adjust our activities and meetings to those? One example is when we were working with the shopkeepers in the neighborhood. All our meetings took place at the Cooperative while having breakfast together, as after that, everyone had to go to their shops. Some practical tools of how to go about it."

Islands in the local

YQ: Another question to consider is how to build structures that are sustainable? When you involve many different communities and you bring people together, what is the common ground?

In the case of Utrecht, in the Netherlands, Moira is a space used by several collectives and communities. There is a structure of access to the space, shaped by the collectives. There's a monthly user meeting where delegates are sent to talk about practicalities and how to be together in the space. What is interesting is that this constellation of collectives and communities ideologically is very mixed to the extent of countering each other, but still they share space. The localised relation and the dependence on the same space may be one of the reasons that keep this constellation in collaboration. Certain ideological discussions are put aside because of the collaboration and the equal ownership over the same space.

When Moira started up, it was very exclusive. It was necessary for the organisers to have it as a space of people of color, migrants, people with migrant backgrounds, queer, and trans people because there was no space in the city that was/is run by these identities. And the exclusivity was also a problem for the residents who provided space to use. But now, one can see that actually, because of the exclusivity, it draws a specific kind of crowd and a specific kind of collective. The exclusivity was necessary in order to find the common ground.

With enough commitment to the common ground, you can cohabitate in difference.

JA: That speaks to the necessity of sharing space and welcoming one another. Spaces are needed in order to collectively organise, to feel safe, to practice.

The Afrikaanderwijk Cooperative in Rotterdam is such a space.⁷ One can see it as a core because, without that space, it's so hard to organise. It's also about affordability and accessibility and about having a space used by different collectives that can sometimes meet beyond their differences. Just like Reading Counterpower and a local Salsa club!

The key as a tool for meeting each other

CJ: Varia is another space in Rotterdam which is home to many different collectives.⁸ The key to the Varia space becomes almost like a tool for various organisers to meet each other.

7. The Afrikaanderwijk Cooperative, founded in 2013, is a cooperative of engaged residents of the Afrikaanderwijk. The Cooperative researches and tests new ways of living, how to learn and work together, and how to provide collective care in practice. It originated from a preliminary trajectory of Freehouse, an initiative of artist Jeanne van Heeswijk. The Cooperative promotes sustainable local production, knowledge exchange, cultural development, and entrepreneurship on the basis of shared responsibility and participation. The Cooperative provides services such as catering, cleaning, transport, textile production, consultancy, and cultural programming. All activities are run by residents or others rooted in the area. By being actively engaged and present in the area for many years, the Afrikaanderwijk Cooperative knows the power of local communities and small-scale open organisations, in which (informal) learning and working come together. The organisational form ensures that money circulates as much as possible within the district, thus benefiting the district itself.

8. Varia is a space for developing collective approaches to everyday technology. Varia members maintain and facilitate a collective infrastructure that generates questions, opinions, modifications, help, and action. Varia figures things out as they go, tries to keep notes, is multilingual, and has open hours.

A meeting was organised for all the members who use the space, who have the keys, because a lot of people have extra keys to the space given on a base of trust. I really appreciate the gesture when spaces offer for different collectives to come together.

The issue is that, very often, there are small islands which, on one hand, are good and they should exist for the sake of decentralisation. Then, on the other hand, without knowing each other or how to support each other and also not having the space or capacity to come together, very often this manner of working results in losing energy and efficiency. When the Feministas en Rotterdam collective, which is also housed at Varia, organised the public manifestation on the 8th of March, speakers reflecting the intersectional thinking of the collective were invited. The main feedback that the Feministas received from the speakers and the participants of the demonstration was, "We should meet more often because we have so many crossovers that we should really work together to make our islands a bigger together archipelago". But then, no one had the time to come together on a regular basis; we even struggle to make space for our own collectives.

How to sustain...

IC: We return to the issue of the three main people who always show up to the meetings.

CJ: Yet this phenomenon within collectives many times has to do with having families and kids, work to go to, with burnouts, exhaustion, mental health issues, and many other factors.



JA: Within that perspective, we may consider that there's many different ways of being active.

It's not all about participating in demonstrations. A lot of people who have children are active in the schools with other children and other families, for example, which is not an effort to be underestimated.

Time and timing are also to be considered, as is the case when working people are involved in the organising or action. It is helpful to keep schedules of meetings regular, to a certain extent, and flexible on the other. Because you need that rhythm. We all know you need the community rhythm, but what is this?

JvH: It's like the drawing of the bandwidth of the carrots. When there's hyper energy and when there's no more energy and how to stay in that bandwidth, almost like a heartbeat.

SD: Communities are mostly survival tools, which is also needed, but they remains limited to a specific community. It also stays limited when it comes to building up an alternative collective future.

That's also what neo-liberal capitalism has been doing to us all: fragmenting our living environments to the level that the way we can commit to showing up right now, in a fragmented landscape as well.

And this is, of course, one of those typical things that capitalism does: working towards isolation, making things insular.

And then we remain within our bubbles. It's kind of a vicious circle.

The bandwidth, the 'beep beep beep' (refers to a diagram drawn in a workshop by the ungovernable at Dar Bellarj for the Shadow of the Moon project, see booklet 1)

You repeat those mechanisms within your own community, which is not connected to the people. The people, the masses, are not even aware of your anti-system work. And then there's the commitment. Being in the streets, going into markets, you get in touch with what you are actually doing.⁹

9. We are here referring to an action taken by one of our groups which connected solidarity with Palestine and conversations about the process of gentrification happening in Rotterdam South and the Afrikaanderwijk. Our event, a vigil for the martyred children of Gaza, took place in public space. Accompanying that, there were members of our collective who entered the market with flyers and invited people for a coffee at the vigil spot. Many people from the area joined us, and we had many fruitful conversations that live on in present and future activities. It was a successful event in terms of outreach and direct communication between our activist circle and the people of the Afrikaanderwijk area.

Intergenerational exchange and the communities to which we belong

Often the most frustrating thing about progressive struggles is that each generation must repeat the mistakes of the previous struggles.

—Jo Freeman, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, 1970

YQ: Another thing to consider is intergenerational knowledge exchange, in the sense that the youth or the new generation of activists feel the need or urgency to reinvent the wheel. I feel that, within a white Dutch context, there is a disconnection and lack of respect to elders. Of course, intergenerational exchange does happen here too, for example the black, migrant, refugee women's movement from the 80s and the 90s that brought together these different generations again through (re) publishing books and archival research and such. But there is something there.

SD: That disconnection makes it so easy for the enemy (the State). We know what they're going to do because they have their structures. They pass on that knowledge. They have the archive. And historical erasure is exactly this.

YQ: The absence of intergenerational exchange is a problem, but not exactly what causes historical erasure. That's totally a colonial strategy, right? A propaganda strategy that is fully embedded into the western education system.

SD: Without a structure or an archive, you don't have anything to pass on.

SP: While reading the texts, and during this conversation, I started thinking about which communities I belong to and how that relates to my practice. I made a list of the communities I feel/think I belong to and work for. And that made me realise how that also relates to language.

The green parakeets

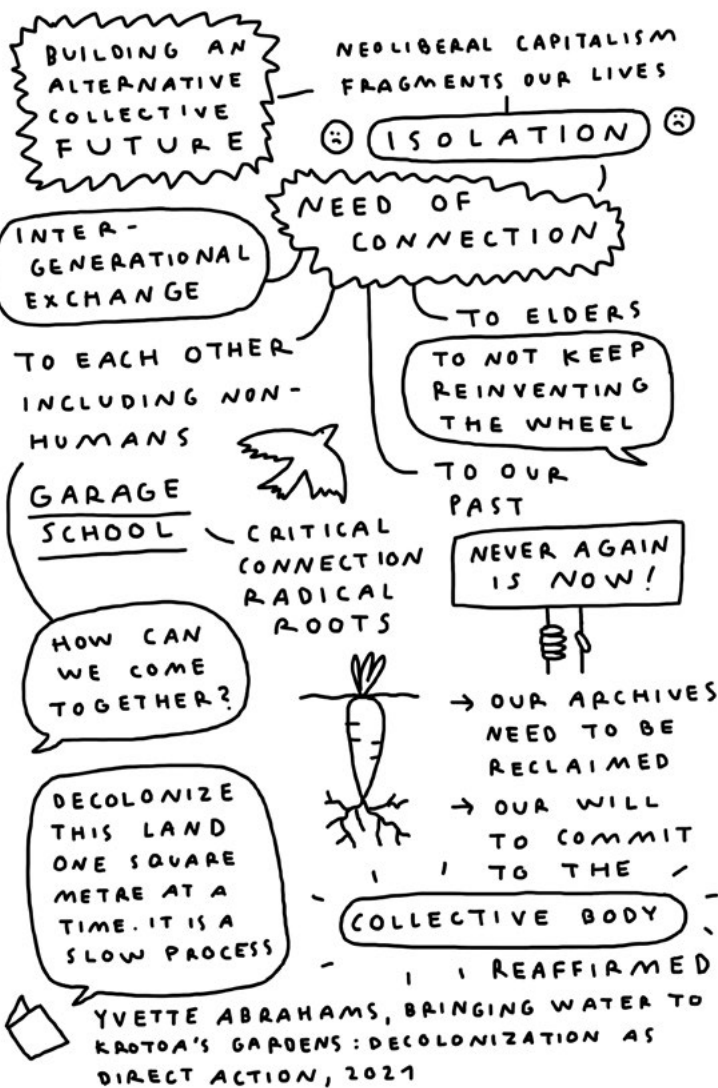
Garcés mentions in her text the semi-detached house as a trap and gives an example for this in how nothing ever happens in their gardens. Which is half truth! Because they are spaces for other communities, the non-human ones, such as the green parakeets of Rotterdam — a community I feel I am part of somehow. There's also the non-human aspect to it, which is particular we didn't mention at all, which says something about all of us. And that is mentioned in the text of Yvette Abrahams, *Bringing Water to Krotoa's Gardens: Decolonisation as Direct Action*, which is the one we discussed the least.¹⁰

10. "And also consider that the West itself has produced the variables to contradict its impressive trajectory every time. This is the way in which the West is not monolithic, and this is why it is surely necessary that it move toward entanglement. The real question is whether it will do so in a participatory manner or if its entanglement will be based on old impositions. And even if we should have no illusions about the realities, their facts already begin to change simply by asking this question", Édouard Glissant on opacity from *Poetics of Relation*, 1997.

So I went into this whole reflection of the different communities and then how they think. It intersects with the limits of this idea of identity politics. For our collective, The Garage School, we do feel committed to this place, in a critical way and being critical of it, but trying to connect to it, to radicalise ourselves in it, in taking roots here.¹¹

11. The Garage School was born in Bogotá, Colombia in 2013. It is an informal study programme that has no permanent infrastructure; our schools emerge like fruiting bodies in relation to a place, subject, or host(s). We explore knowledges and tools that are considered peripheral, informal, or lacking official validity. We are committed to working with communities in our immediate context and beyond as well as situating ourselves and operating within a constellation of aligned collectives and practices.

Each garage school adopts a particular method or metaphor: a school in public space to research the production of the commons with grassroots organisations, a fermentation school organised around a lunar cycle, an underground school that made a bar from scratch with soil bricks, and DIY wine and spirits. We believe the only thing you need to make a school is people.



By no means a conclusion, a slow everlasting process

How can we come together? How can we merge our islands sometimes or even travel to each other's island in a tactical unity? As artists, community organisers, activists, and cultural workers, how do we bridge the gap, overcome the fragmentation, and reach the masses that our work attempts to do but often remains behind visible or invisible barriers?

In her text *Bringing Water to Krotoa's Gardens: Decolonisation as Direct Action*, Abrahams describes how and what it means for her to "decolonise this land one square metre at a time. It is a slow process." For us, residing in the West, in the beating heart of 'the hydra', the monster with many heads, how would it be possible to start a process of detoxifying the ground where we try to grow roots?¹² To build structures of organising for the long breath, within the pulse of community rhythms and with the acceptance of diversity of tactics? The generations before us have cultivated tools of resistance to counter power's tactics of erasure and of discrediting. Our archives need to be reclaimed. Our will to commit to the caring of this collective body that will transcend our livable time must be reaffirmed.

This conversation remains ongoing.

12. "The Wall and the Crack. First Note on the Zapatista Method". Words by SupGaleano in the Inauguration of the Seminar *Critical Thought and the Capitalist Hydra*.

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Contributors

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Illustrated by Carmen José

Booklet 3 in the series **Carrots die everywhere: Publishing practices from the Shadow of the Moon**

Commissioned and conceived as part of the **Shadow of the Moon** project, with Francesca Masoero, Molemo Moiloa, Pelonomi Moiloa, Sarah Mounia Kachiri, and Jeanne van Heeswijk

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Shadow of the Moon is a project by QANAT, a research platform held by LE 18 & Dar Bellarj Foundation, Marrakech, Morocco; Jeanne van Heeswijk, Rotterdam, the Netherlands; the ungovernable, Johannesburg, South Africa

With thanks to *It's OK... Commoning Uncertainties*, an initiative by Jeanne van Heeswijk commissioned and hosted by Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, Afrikaanderwijk Cooperative and The Social Practice Library, Rotterdam South, the Netherlands; 12 on Park Lane Community Garden, Johannesburg, South Africa; Dar Bellarj Foundation, Marrakech, Morocco

Printed in Johannesburg & Breda

2025

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Supported by Stimulerings Fond/Creative Industries Fund NL, Groothandelsgebouw, Weena 723 Rotterdam, The Netherlands

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